

Balthasar Burkhard

10.02.–21.05.2018

Part I (Fotostiftung Schweiz)

With this major retrospective, Fotomuseum Winterthur and Fotostiftung Schweiz pay homage to the Swiss artist Balthasar Burkhard (1944–2010). His oeuvre is almost unparalleled in the way it reflects not only the self-invention of a photographer, but also the emancipation of photography as an artistic medium in its own right during the second half of the twentieth century.

Together, the two institutions chart the many and varied facets of Burkhard's career, step by step. Fotostiftung presents early works from the days of his apprenticeship with Kurt Blum and his first independent documentary photographs. The exhibition also traces Burkhard's role as a photographer alongside the curator Harald Szeemann and capturing images of Bern's bohemian scene in the 1960s and 1970s. During that time, Burkhard carved his niche as a photographer and artist, developing his first large-scale photographic canvases in collaboration with his friend Markus Raetz and eventually breaking away from the European art world in search of both himself and new inspiration in the USA.

The second part of the exhibition at Fotomuseum shows the work created by Burkhard after his return to Europe, and his exploration of the photographic tableau. It was during this phase that he largely succeeded in emancipating photography from its purely documentary function. Using monumental formats, he translated the motif of the human body into sculptural landscapes and site-specific architectures. He went on to apply his stylistic device of formal reduction to portraits and landscapes. This marked the beginning of a series of experiments in the handling of photographic techniques. From long-distance aerial photographs of megacities such as Mexico City and Tokyo to close-up studies of flowers and plants, Burkhard seemed to be constantly seeking a formula that would embrace both nature and culture, encapsulating a sensory and sensual grasp of visible reality.

Encompassing half a century of creativity, the exhibition not only shows individual works, but is also underpinned by applied projects, films and many documents from the archives of the artist. This wealth of material allows a reflection both on Balthasar Burkhard's own view of how his photographs should be presented in the exhibition space as well as his constant weighing-up of other media.

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Early Photographs

Balthasar Burkhard was just eight years old when his father gave him a camera to take along on a school excursion. Burkhard himself describes this early experience with the camera as the starting point of his career. It was also his father who suggested an apprenticeship with Kurt Blum, one of Switzerland's foremost photographers, ranking alongside Paul Senn, Jakob Tuggener and Gotthard Schuh. Blum taught the young Balz, as he was nicknamed, all the finer points of darkroom technique as well as the art of large-format photography. The earliest work from Burkhard's apprentice years is a reportage of the school, in the form of a book, while his documentation of the Distelzwang Society's historic guildhall in the old quarter of Bern was clearly a lesson in architectural photography. Yet, no sooner had he completed his apprenticeship than Burkhard was already embarking on his very own independent projects inspired by post-war humanist photography, such as *Auf der Alp*, a study of rural Alpine life, for which he was awarded the Swiss Federal Grant for Applied Arts in 1964.

Chronicler of Bohemian Life in Bern

Even during his apprenticeship, Burkhard moved in the Bernese art circles to which his teacher Kurt Blum also belonged. In 1962, he created a first portrait, in book form, of painter and writer Urs Dickerhof. Shortly after that, he became friends with his near-contemporary Markus Raetz, and started taking photographs for the charismatic curator Harald Szeemann, who was director of Kunsthalle Bern from 1961 to 1969. Burkhard immersed himself in the vibrantly dynamic Swiss art scene, documenting the often controversial exhibitions of conceptual art at the Kunsthalle, and capturing the lives of Bern's bohemian set with his 35mm camera. These visual mementos would later be collated in a kind of photographic journal. Initial collaborative projects with artists included a 1966 artists' book about the village of Curogna (Ticino) and a window display for the Loeb department store in Bern featuring photographic portraits of the Bernese artist Esther Altorfer, devised in collaboration with Markus Raetz and his later wife, fashion designer Monika Raetz-Müller.

Landscapes 1969

Inspired by his friend Raetz, Burkhard photographed bleak and rugged snow-covered landscapes in the Bernese Seeland region. Heaps of earth piled up along the wayside reminded him of Robert Smithson's *Earthworks*, which had just emerged in contemporary art. As Burkhard would later explain, "I wanted to leave out everything relating to myself, so that I could truly relate to what remained. I distanced myself from my subject-matter. I succeeded in stepping back both from myself and from my work."

A close-up of bare agricultural soil, vaguely reminiscent of a lunar landscape, forms the basis for an object with a

neon tube created in 1969 for the legendary exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* in collaboration with Harald Szeemann, Markus Raetz and Jean-Frédéric Schnyder. In 1969, Burkhard's brown-toned landscapes were included in the 1969 exhibition *photo actuelle suisse* in Sion. They were subsequently published as his first independent portfolio by Allan Porter in the May issue of *Camera* magazine, which was dedicated to avant-garde European photography and its affinity with contemporary art.

The Amsterdam Canvases 1969–70

When Markus Raetz took a studio in Amsterdam in 1969, he and Burkhard continued to work on joint projects. Photographs of everyday motifs were enlarged, practically life-sized, onto canvas, and caused a sensation in the spring 1970 exhibition *Visualisierte Denkprozesse (Visualised thought processes)* at Kunstmuseum Luzern, curated by Jean-Christophe Ammann, who wrote: "On huge canvases, they [Raetz and Burkhard] showed, among other things, a spartan studio space, a bedroom, a kitchen, a curtain. They relativised the purely object-like character by hanging the canvases on clips. The resulting folds enriched the images by adding a new dimension." In other words, the folds in the canvas created a "quasi ironic and disillusioning barrier". Burkhard's large-format works foreshadowed the monumental photographic tableaux that would eventually herald the ultimate march of photography into the museum space some ten years later.

Documentarist of the International Art Scene

By the end of the 1960s, Harald Szeemann and his polarising, controversial exhibitions were drawing increasing attention far beyond the boundaries of Switzerland. In particular, his (in)famous 1969 show *When Attitudes Become Form* unleashed heated debates that ultimately led to Szeemann's resignation as director of Kunsthalle Bern. Then, in 1970, he shocked the members and visitors of the Kunstverein in Cologne with an exhibition dedicated to *Happening & Fluxus*. Here, too, Burkhard was on hand with his camera. Jean-Christophe Ammann, with whom Burkhard undertook a research trip to the USA in 1972, photographing many artists' studios, proved no less controversial a figure. Moreover, Burkhard also photographed artists, actions and installations at the 1972 *documenta 5* in Kassel, which was headed by none other than Szeemann himself. Given the expanded concept of art that prevailed at the time, which strengthened the role of performance art and installation works alike, photography, too, gained a newfound core significance. Indeed, it was only through photography that many of these innovative works were preserved for posterity.

Chicago and the Self-Invention of the Artist

Following a relatively unproductive period in the wake of *documenta 5*, during which he worked, among other things,

on an unfinished documentary project about the small Swiss town of Zofingen, Burkhard spent the years between 1975 and 1978 in Chicago, where he taught photography at the University of Illinois. It was while he was there that he once again reprised the series of photo canvases he had been working on in Amsterdam between 1969 and 1970. This led to new large-format works portraying everyday scenes such as the back seat of an automobile or the interior of a home with a TV, as well as three now lost photographs of roller skaters and a very androgynous back-view nude study of a young man. In 1977 the Zolla/Lieberman Gallery in Chicago presented these canvases together with a selection of the Amsterdam works in what was Burkhard's first solo exhibition. Critics were impressed by his "soft photographs". The *Chicago Tribune*, for instance, enthused: "'European' grace is wedded to 'American' strength in a supreme artistic fiction that suggests the wide-screen format of film."

Self-Portraits

In Chicago, Burkhard rekindled his friendship with performance and conceptual artist Thomas Kovachevic, whom he had first met at *documenta 5* and who now introduced him to the local art scene. At the same time, Burkhard toyed with the notion of trying his chances as a film actor in Hollywood. With Kovachevic's help, he produced a series of self-portraits, both Polaroids and slides, which he presented in a small snakeskin-covered box as his application portfolio. He approached Alfred Hitchcock and Joshua Shelley of Columbia Pictures, albeit unsuccessfully. His only film role was in Urs Egger's 1978 *Eiskalte Vögel (Icebound; screened in seminar room I)*. Burkhard later transformed some of his self-portraits into large-scale canvases, through which he asserted his newfound sense of identity as an artist, making himself the subject-matter of his own artistic work. One of these was also shown in the *Photo Canvases* exhibition at Zolla/Lieberman Gallery.

Screenings (seminar room I)

Chicago Lecture

In his capacity as a photography tutor, Burkhard gave a lecture to students in January 1976 in which he presented a retrospective overview of his work to date – from his very first schoolboy photos of 1952 to his shots of a trip to Morocco in 1975. He placed particular attention on his documentary work for Harald Szeemann, as well as his collaboration with the architects of Atelier 5 in Bern. In the course of this overview, he openly admitted that he had at times had moments of self-doubt; a theme that ran through his lecture like a red thread, with occasional glimpses of gloomy symbolism. The manuscript of the lecture, written with the aid of his friend Walo von Fellenberg, and the accompanying 35mm slides, are almost fully extant in the photographer's estate. They form the basis of the filmic reconstruction of his lecture, which can be viewed here.

Eiskalte Vögel (Icebound)

In 1978 Burkhard landed a role in Urs Egger's short black-and-white film *Eiskalte Vögel (Icebound)*. Originally made under the working title *Vertreter (Travelling salesmen)*, it was Egger's directorial debut following his training at the American Film Institute in Hollywood. In the film, Burkhard plays the role of a taciturn man suffering from a cold, driving through a grim winter landscape with his older and ultra-polite business partner (Eduard Linkers). They pick up an attractive young woman (Esther Christinat) who was dropped at the roadside by her boyfriend. At first, she feels at ease in the car with these two misfits. But following an awkward evening meal in an unheated, abandoned chalet, and faced with the prospect of spending the night with them, she has second thoughts and decides to leave. When it premiered, film critic Bernhard Giger described it as one of those typically "drawn-out" films "that allow enough time for the characters, objects and landscapes to develop so that even minor details take on as much or even more significance than the actual plot-line."

Part II (Fotomuseum Winterthur)

Body and Sculpture

The 1980s heralded the advent of a particularly productive period for Balthasar Burkhard in which he adopted a more sculptural approach to photography, treating his prints as an integral part of the exhibition architecture. Just as he himself had witnessed how the generation of artists before him had called the classic exhibition space into question, so too did his own latest works now begin to take control of that space. Burkhard became one of the foremost proponents of large-scale photographic tableaux, as evidenced by his groundbreaking exhibitions at Kunsthalle Basel in 1983 and Musée Rath, Geneva, in 1984.

It was in the photo canvases he made in Chicago during the late 1970s that Burkhard first turned towards the motif of the body as a sculptural form with which he would continue to experiment over the coming years. Such an overtly sculptural approach to the body and to the nude as landscape soon began to demand a larger format than Burkhard had previously been using. An arm, almost four metres long, framed by heavy steel, or the multipart installation *Das Knie (Knee)*, reflect the very core of his creative oeuvre in all its many facets: monumentality, fragmentation and the breaking of genre boundaries by transposing two-dimensional images into spatially commanding installations.

Portraits: Types and Individuals

The increasing formal reduction of Balthasar Burkhard's images continued in the field of portraiture. He invited fellow artists such as Lawrence Weiner and Christian Boltanski to sit for him. With this series, it seemed that he had finally put behind him his days as a chronicler of the art scene, reliant on the techniques of applied photography.

Portraits of a rather different kind are his profiles of animals, in an equally reduced setting, against the backdrop of a tarpaulin. Redolent of Renaissance drawings or nineteenth century animal photography, his images of sheep, wolves and lions come across as representing ideal and typical examples of their species without anthropomorphising them, while at the same time wrenching them out of their natural environment. These images reached a broad audience through the popular 1997 children's book "*Click!*", *said the Camera*, which was republished in its second edition in 2017.

Architectural Photography

Given his increasing success in the art world, Burkhard could well afford to be selective about his choice of commissioned works. He had already been taking photographs for architects connected with the Bern-based firm Atelier 5 back in the 1960s, and was still accepting commissions in this field in the 1990s. Burkhard's photographic essay on the Ricola building designed by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron indicates just how thoroughly his own distinctive artistic syntax permeates his commissioned and architectural photography, right through to the details of fragments and materials. These photographs were shown in the Swiss Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of Architecture in 1991, having been explicitly designed for this particular exhibition space. As in his artistic oeuvre, Burkhard operates here with spatially commanding installations, skilfully dovetailing the architectural motif with the presentational form.

Aerial Photography

In the 1990s, before the art world had even begun to turn its attention to the subject of megacities, Burkhard was already taking a keen interest in the world's major conurbations. Following in the footsteps of his father, who had been a Swiss airforce pilot, he took bird's-eye-view photographs from a plane. His panoramic shots of cities such as London, Mexico City and Los Angeles were preceded by small-format studies of clouds: the so-called *Nuages* series. Having incorporated a study of rural Switzerland into his formative training in 1963 with the series *Auf der Alp (On the Alp)*, he returned once more to focus on the landscape of his homeland in the early 2000s with an entire series of aerial photographs of the Bernina mountain range.

Landscape and Flora

In the last two decades of his life, Burkhard concentrated primarily on landscape and flora, turning to historical precedents both in his techniques and in his choice of motif. The desert formations of Namibia, in which all sense of proportion is lost amid the remote and untouched wilderness, set a counterpoint to the sprawling urban expanses of Mexico City and London. The diptych *Welle (Wave)*, by contrast, pays homage to the work of French artist Gustave Courbet, with Burkhard making a pilgrimage to the tideswept shores where the father of Realism had painted in 1870.

In another series, Burkhard adapts the aesthetics of botanical plant studies, which were as widely used around the turn of the twentieth century as the complex photographic process of heliography, and transposes these to larger-than-life formats. Whereas Burkhard, as a young photographer, had captured the exuberant art scene of the 1960s and 1970s, snapshot-style, he later went on, as an artist-photographer, to explore the potential of the photographic tableau, diligently researching near-forgotten techniques and the sensual details of the visible world.

Materials (Gallery)

Artwork and Commissioned Work

The site-specific installations of his photographs and Burkhard's own dedicated approach to museum spaces warrant an excursion into the archives of the artist, paying particular attention to four exemplary exhibitions.

One spectacular and iconic show was the *Fotowerke (Photo works)* exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel in 1983. Curated by artist Rémy Zaugg, the installations can be reconstructed thanks to the catalogue and copious documentation. Contact prints and studies, for instance, help to give an insight into the no longer extant thirteen metre work *Körper I (Body I)* as well as shedding light on the choice of motif for further body fragments.

A 1984 solo exhibition at the Le Consortium in Dijon, on the other hand, shows how Burkhard responded with his group of works *Das Knie (Knee)* to an entirely different installation context within the given space. Similarly, at the Musée Rath in Geneva that same year, Burkhard, together with his friend Niele Toroni, instigated a radical juxtaposition of photography and painting based on the pillars of the exhibition venue.

At Grand-Hornu in the Belgian town of Mons, by contrast, his life-sized photographs of animals were mounted at eye level. While Burkhard chose a large format for the exhibition venue, the images in his children's book "*Click!*", *said the Camera* tell of a beauty contest between animals in a photo-shoot. This apparent discrepancy between artwork and commissioned work never seemed to be relevant to Burkhard. The sheer volume of his studio photos, alone, indicates just how scrupulously precise he was about the way he wanted to be perceived as a serious photographer.

An accompanying catalogue is published by Steidl, Göttingen, and available at the shop for 39 CHF (28 euros).

Guided tours in dialogue

Wednesday, 7 March, 6.30 p.m.

Designer Trix Wetter and architect Ralph Gentner on Burkhard as a chronicler of Bern's art scene.

Sunday, 15 April, 11.30 a.m.

Filmmaker Bernhard Giger on Burkhard and Bern's photography scene.

Sunday, 6 May, 11.30 a.m.

Publisher Lars Müller on his book projects with Burkhard.

Public guided tours through the exhibition

Every Wednesday, 6.30 p.m. and Sunday, 11.30 a.m.

Please find a more detailed programme at

www.fotostiftung.ch and www.fotomuseum.ch (Education).